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ABSTRACT

The two words, "communication"--defined as the sharing of experience--and "process"--referred to as the movement of interrelated events or actions toward an identifiable goal--may be usefully viewed together as the goal-oriented combination of variables designed to produce at least a single communicative event. In an organizational setting, the assessment of this process, seen as a behavioral system, lends itself to the use of a systems approach. This approach facilitates the unification of divergent findings in almost any field of knowledge. Two of the many ways in which a systems approach might profitably be employed in organizational communication are in the assessment of communicative problems and in the area of systems management. (JM)

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Communicative Process as a Behavioral System: Research Implications for Organizational Communication*

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I.

The systematic study of "communication" has become increasingly popular (perhaps "fashionable" is a better description) in the United States during the past quarter-century, and has produced a sometimes bewildering array of definitions (too often implicit and mystical, rather than explicit and functional), as well as a number of efforts to examine communication (however variously defined) in a variety of contexts and environments. One such context is the "organization" (see below), and the purpose of the remarks which follow is to focus your attention briefly on an approach for the conduct of research of communicative process in organizations.

II.

If one is to conduct research, and if research is defined as the systematic investigation of relationships between and among phenomena for purposes of explanation and prediction, then it is incumbent upon the researcher to employ his language symbols in the research effort as precisely and parsimoniously as possible. For this reason I subscribe completely to the efforts of those who define communication in terms of its etymological root, the Latin verb "communicare", meaning "to share". Accordingly, "communication" here shall refer to the sharing, or "making common", or "transgeneration" of experience. Empirically, this sharing often (but not always) is observable as the extent to which a response intended by a message generator is correlated to a response provided by

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the message perceiver (1,2). Thus, communication usefully can be viewed as one of a series of events which is the culmination of a multivariate process. Each communicative event, having occurred, potentially becomes a continuing part of an interactive process which in turn may result in one or more additional communicative events. Note that communication in this view is not the process itself, but both the result and a possible ingredient in the process. Neither is communication the message per se, nor the channel employed, nor the process of transmission. The unnecessarily ambiguous use of the word "communication" as a synonym for the terms just mentioned in my view tends only to pollute both language and the research environments, and should be avoided like the plague! To say, for example, that "The communication was communicated but no communication occurred" is neither precise nor parsimonious, and borders on the nonsensical.

If "communication" is the term employed to represent that unique event in which experience is shared between persons (or other living organisms), what shall be meant by "communicative process"? The term "process" is typically used to refer to the movement of interrelated events or actions toward an identifiable goal or objective. Communicative process, therefore, is usefully viewed as the goal-oriented combination of variables (events, actions) designed (but not guaranteed!) to produce at least a single communicative event. The variables in question often are arbitrarily identified as including a message generator or initiator, the manifest message itself, a means of transmission or projection, a target perceiver or responder, and a contextual environment (including a time frame) which permits all of these variables to "come together" in such a way that an intended effect can occur. The extent to which the effect as revealed by the perceiver's behavior is what was intended by the generator of the message, then to that extent

communication has occurred. If the effect was not in any way what we intended (no matter how "meaningful" the perceiver's response), then no communication occurred (although lots of "interaction" may have occurred).

To speak of communicative process as a behavioral system certainly is not unique. The focus on participant behaviors in communicative process (as contrasted with emphases on message content, media technology, etc.) provides a common ground for virtually all of those members of our profession who conduct research from a behavioral science orientation.

The so-called "systems" approach, however, may be somewhat more unique, as it represents a particular way of looking at complex but unified combinations of events. In general, the systems approach serves to facilitate unification of divergent findings in almost any field of knowledge; it also lends itself as a framework for integrating and synthesizing conceptually those variables which are in an almost constant state of interaction with each other and their environment (4). In contrast with analytical, experimental, highly specific research techniques, systems theorists attempt to reconcile and unify specific research facts by emphasizing the macroscopic, multidimensional, functional similarities of events. Systems techniques also tend to emphasize longitudinal studies and effects over time. It is this approach which has provided much of the impetus in recent years for the generation of interdisciplinary research, and which in large part prompts the points made in the remainder of this discussion.

The points of interface between the study of human communicative behavior and the study of organizational science in recent years have come to be identified under the label of "organizational communication". Earlier in this discussion communication was defined as the sharing of experience between living organisms; an "organization" we shall define as a goal-oriented

group of living organisms. When these organisms are people, the organization typically is described as a system which exists in order to fulfill a preconceived task or operation through an effective pooling of knowledge and skills.

The functions of any organization conveniently can be classified in terms of three categories: (a) Task functions, which are concerned with those work behaviors which lead to the ultimate product or service which the organization provides, (b) Maintenance functions, which reflect the operations which integrate the organization and which must occur in order to keep the organization viable, and (c) Human functions, which recognize that organizations which produce goods and services do so as the result ultimately of individual volitional human effort, and that the needs and desires of humans affect their performance (5). Clearly, these tasks are not mutually exclusive, and the study of organizational communication attempts to examine the variables associated with fostering effective communication (sharing experiences) with regard to one or a combination of the organization's functions, specifically as they relate to the organization's goals.

My thesis here is that, given the definitions of communication and communicative process described above, the assessment of communicative behaviors occurring in an organizational setting (industrial, governmental, educational, etc.) lends itself to the employment of a systems approach.

Traditionally, communication in complex organizations has been considered only in terms of such things as journalistic (bulletin boards, newsletters and magazines) or technological (telephone systems, dictating equipment) kinds of concerns. These extremely limited and myopic views really took communication for granted in terms of people-behavior. In recent years, however, upper-level management in successful organizations has become increasingly sensitive

to the need for more sophisticated and reliable methods of assessing both the quantity and quality (relevance, effectiveness) of communicative behaviors of organizational personnel at all levels, in terms of the organization's goals.

It is characteristic of human organizations--even relatively simple ones--to exist in a dynamic relationship with their environments. They constitute "open" systems, receiving inputs, processing them, and providing outputs. The more complex the system, the less likely one can deal with its individual elements as separate entities, and the more necessary it is to move to a broader systems approach. This reality emphasizes the notion that a given system consists of subsystems, and is itself part of a still larger system; thus, the interacting nature of subsystems requires that we examine an organization (including its communicative components) in a holistic, synergistic framework. Human communicative process involves an organization of a minimum of two people operating in a relatively open system subject to reciprocal influences, and in itself constitutes the most significant subsystem to be examined in the study of organizational communication.

But what are some implications for the study of organizational communication of viewing both the organization and communicative process from a systems perspective? Let me suggest but two:

(A) No doubt many of you, like myself, have been invited from time to time to consult with a business or industrial organization or governmental agency on some kind of communicative problem(s) You may find yourself conducting what has recently come to be known formally as a "communication audit" of the organization(6). Such an assessment procedure when ill-used results in a kind of "brush fire" approach to problem-solving, with the consultant and the management personnel figuratively rushing from one hot spot to another in an effort to keep the problems under control. A

systems approach would advocate that a procedure something like the following by employed:

(a) Identify which of the organization's functions (Task, Maintenance, Human) are not adequately fulfilled.

(b) Identify the organizational subsystems and their operational communicative networks which have as their objective the particular function under scrutiny.

(c) At the points of interface of the involved systems, analyze the communicative process variables (participants, messages, media, etc.) in terms of the compatibility of the subsystems and the larger system's goals/objectives.

(d) For the identified slippage or barrier points, recommend appropriate corrective procedures, keeping in mind their probable effects on all systems involved.

(e) Implement corrective procedures, evaluate over time, and adjust as necessary.

The thrust of the above procedure is to treat communicative process not only as a unique system in and of itself, but in a larger sense as part of another larger, related system.

(B) The example discussed in (A) above involves what the professional literature refers to as a "Systems Analysis". But another insight to be gained from viewing communicative process as a behavioral system with implications for organizational communication is in the area of "Systems Management". Just as we individually plan, organize, control and direct our communicative process behaviors as a system, so too do organizations--in greater or lesser degree. Just as we individually are more or less sensitive to the impact of our communicative behaviors on others in our environments, so should organizations be sensitive. However, although we have been taught by example and decree from earliest childhood to manage all phases of our communicative behavior as a functional activity, it is very unusual to find an organization which includes trained management personnel responsible for organizational communication as a functional activity (3). Even today most

organizations tend to take human communication for granted. If it is remembered, however, that the elements in communicative process involve behaviors that can be systematically learned, and that the principles of communication cut across system boundaries, it seems reasonable to conclude that variables affecting organizational communication are as amenable to effective management as are the elements of personal communicative behavior. Accordingly, professionals trained in the area of organizational communication (particularly with knowledge and experience in the systems approach) have the potential for substantially improving the operations of virtually any organization.

III.

The purposes of this discussion have been to (1) suggest some functional definitions for the terms employed in the title of this paper, and (2) indicate just two among many ways that a systems approach might profitably be employed in the area of organizational communication. The task is a challenging one, and requires persons expert in the areas of organizational sciences, communicational theories/processes, and research methods sensitive to the systems approach.

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